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201243Z Oct 03

UNCLAS ROME 004775

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/WE, INR/EUC and DRL/IL

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Immigration: Deputy Prime Minister Fini's Bold Stroke

Ref: a) Milan 639; b) Rome 2948

1. (SBU) Summary: National Alliance leader Gianfranco Fini's proposal to extend voting rights to legal immigrants has jolted Prime Minister Berlusconi's center-right coalition, set the chattering classes abuzz and intensified intracoalition squabbles. Fini's gambit complicates Berlusconi's political life and the coalition's already less-than-smooth workings, but it endangers neither. Despite the sharp elbows, competing agendas and flaring tempers, all the coalition members still see more advantage to being in government than out. Regardless of whether his proposal survives a tortuous legislative process to emerge as law, Fini has already scored some important gains, throwing anti-immigrant Northern League leader Bossi off-balance; pulling his National Alliance party further from its fascist roots; and burnishing his own credentials within the center-right as Berlusconi's potential successor. End Summary.

Finis Blast.

2. (U) Fini picked an innocuous occasion -- an October 8 address to an advisory body on economic and labor policy -- to launch his bombshell. Italy should consider relaxing the tight quotas on legal immigration established by tough new immigration legislation (which Fini co-authored) last year, he declared. Moreover, it was time to consider granting voting rights to some of Italy's 2.4 million legal immigrants, at least in local elections, Fini argued.

3. (U) Initial reaction to media reports of Fini's initiative was shocked silence, followed by the sound of jaws across the country hitting the floor. Reaction within the coalition was mixed: the Union of Christian Democrats of the Center expressed its support; Bossi and his Northern League "praetorians" complained the loudest, ominously warning that if Fini insisted on pursuing his proposal, early elections were inevitable (comment: which is pretty much Bossi's reaction to anything he disagrees with). An irritated Berlusconi noted the proposal was not included in the coalition's agreed platform and denied the clash of opinions signaled new trouble within the coalition. Opposition pols expressed their delight that Fini was softening his stance on immigration and pledged to support any draft legislation to codify his proposal. Initial reaction from Fini's surprised colleagues within National Alliance was also mixed, with some prominent party conservatives dissenting.

4. (U) Undeterred, Fini pressed ahead, announcing that AN's parliamentary group would begin drafting a constitutional amendment to modify voting eligibility requirements (although the opposition Democrats of the Left already have tabled similar legislation). Bossi's rhetoric escalated as well, the Northern League leader alternately threatening to block any liberalization of immigration policy and immediately to resign. Over the ensuing week, Berlusconi reportedly spent substantial time talking Bossi off his rhetorical ledge, reminding him that most of the League's "reformist" agenda, notably regional devolution, remained unfinished. After a week of political drama, threats and recriminations, things quieted October 15, when Fini clarified that the constitutional amendment would be presented only by AN, not on behalf of the government, and Bossi declared "enough polemics. we have serious work to do."

.had, and hit, many targets

5. (SBU) Fini's initiative, though surprising, clearly was not impulsive. Rather, it appears calculated to advance both short- and longer-term. Fini's aim -- successfully completed on most counts -- was to:

-- warn Berlusconi not to take his, and AN's, support for granted. Fini has been frustrated that AN priorities,

whether in the budget or on broader reform proposals, consistently have taken a back seat to a convergence of Forza Italia-Northern League interests. Fini was stung particularly by Berlusconi's criticism of him and his party after AN deputies' absence prompted a rare parliamentary defeat of a GOI bill. Provisions within legislation to liberalize Italy's communications sector (including rules on media ownership that would have a direct impact on

Berlusconi's business holdings) failed to garner enough votes in the Chamber and the entire bill was sent back to the Senate. Looming in the near-future are the prospect of a post-EU presidency cabinet shuffle, which Fini wants and Berlusconi is resisting, and next year's elections for the European Parliament.

-- throw Bossi off-balance. After a summer in which Berlusconi refused to condemn (and sometimes condoned) the Northern League leader's liberal use of bombast and brinksmanship to force League-friendly changes to several government initiatives, Fini goaded Bossi to reveal his interests. In backing away from his threat to resign or topple the government, Bossi was forced to acknowledge that the Northern League's objectives are better served within the coalition.

-- demonstrate his strength within AN. Despite the initial dissent from some elements of the party, members largely closed ranks behind Fini as he insisted on pursuing the initiative. As a result, he has moved AN further toward the conservative mainstream (including, longer-term, membership in the center-right grouping within the European Parliament) and away from the intolerance of its fascist-era roots.

-- reposition himself politically. Fini clearly is looking ahead to the post-Berlusconi landscape. Absent a natural successor within Forza Italia, many pundits agree that Berlusconi's successor as leader of the center-right will be either Fini or Chamber President Casini, a bona fide centrist. Fini's newfound support for immigrant rights continues a personal makeover that includes reconciliation with Italy's Jewish community and public condemnation of Italian fascism's abuses.

Comment

6. (SBU) Fini's initiative reverberated across the political landscape, but any cracks it exposed in the coalition's foundation won't topple this government. His appeal is more interesting for the cracks it caused, or exposed, in Italians' evolving views about immigration. The thinking and habits of a fairly homogeneous society that places a premium on tradition have been slow to catch up with the reality of Italy's growing immigrant population. The draft constitutional amendment will take a long time to emerge from parliament, affording substantial opportunities for Italians of all political stripes to debate the relative costs and benefits of immigration for this rapidly aging society. Parliamentarians' and politicians' rigid adherence to ideological conventions probably will strip that debate of much of its pragmatic value, but the end result still may be a step toward fuller integration of Italy's immigrant population. In the meantime, Fini has jumped into the center of that conversation and, at least for now, out of Berlusconi's shadow.

Countryman

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2003ROME04775 - Classification: UNCLASSIFIED